

Time to Be A True Friend and Insist on Real Change in Israeli Palestinian Relations

We have just returned from a trip to Gaza. What we have seen and heard there is profoundly troubling--hospitals and schools destroyed, the industrial and employment base ruined, relief centers burned, and innocent civilians strip searched and forced to flee their homes to United Nations tents and shelters.

Some will deny these events. However, from what we have seen, the destruction in Gaza cannot be denied and the official explanations lack credibility in the face of the evidence on the ground.

We also visited Israeli communities and families that have suffered multiple and random hits by rockets launched by Hamas from Gaza. No one should have to live wondering when their children, their homes, or their place of worship or work will be struck next.

We unequivocally condemn such attacks. Everyone loses in such exchanges – especially the children – both Israeli and Palestinian. In fact, about 750,000 of Gaza residents are children. We talked with mental health workers in Gaza and Israel about the terrible effects of trauma on children and their families. We are convinced that the strategy in Gaza and ongoing policies in the West Bank are counterproductive to the cause of justice and lasting peace for all concerned.

In our judgment, pursuing extremists with overwhelming air power in one of the most densely populated areas in the world—with no means for civilians to escape--ensures the devastation that has occurred in Gaza. The extremist targets may have been hit, but so too were essential civilian services, and any means of economic self-sufficiency. Palestinian families and businesses now lack the resources to rebuild because they cannot get glass for windows or concrete. The consequence is that Hamas has not been visibly weakened, but ironically, moderate voices in the region have been demonstrably weakened.

The West Bank

Beyond Gaza, a less dramatic but counterproductive strategy is taking place in the West Bank. The Palestinian Authority leaders have recognized the right of Israel to exist, have been fighting the corruption of prior regimes, and have maintained law and order throughout the recent Gaza assaults.

In spite of these efforts, the economy of the West Bank is crippled by more than 600 hundred imposed checkpoints. Palestinians must endure long and humiliating searches on a daily basis and even essential medical professionals and critically ill patients are forced to take circuitous and costly detours.

Meanwhile, despite commitments to the contrary, Israeli settlements continue to expand throughout the West Bank.

What, we were asked repeatedly by moderate Palestinians and others in the Islamic world, is the reward for moderation and peace?

What Needs to Happen

It is too often overlooked that the United States has given billions of dollars in aid, including hundreds of millions last year, to help the Palestinian people and move the peace process forward. President Obama has taken positive strides with his call to President Abbas, a commitment of millions more in emergency aid recently announced by Secretary Clinton, and the appointment of special envoy George Mitchell.

With the election of a new administration in Israel, the United States should exercise leadership to ensure immediate and lasting changes that move the region toward lasting peace. Because our own security and integrity are at stake, U.S. aid should be linked to these changes.

The most pressing need is greater humanitarian relief for Gaza. More aid and more types of aid must be allowed into Gaza and borders must be re-opened to commercial and civilian crossings. Simultaneously, there should be an immediate, total and permanent end to settlement expansion within all disputed territory. Cessation of settlement expansion must then be followed by a negotiated and peaceful withdrawal as spelled out in the roadmap agreements.

On the Arab side, other nations in the region must go beyond promises of “normal diplomatic relations” with Israel and declare recognition of Israel. There must be an immediate and permanent end to rocket attacks, an end to any financial or logistical support for terror, and clear efforts to condemn speech and actions that incite hatred and violence. There must be a sincere commitment to relations beyond a “cold peace” and to expanded economic cooperation, greater freedom of travel, and freedom of religion for persons of all faiths.

Turning Points

Remarkably, given what they have been through, the average civilians we met in both Gaza and Sderot showed us extraordinary hospitality and kindness. We are convinced that Palestinians, and their neighbors in Israel, deserve and can obtain a better future. In the interest of our own security and integrity, the United States must have the courage to stand for our highest ideals, for justice, and for freedom for all peoples of the region.